

**Western Balkans
Media for Change**

Call for Applications

ACTION GRANT SCHEME

**Deadline for applications:
14 February 2024, 24:00 local time**

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1. Background

The project ‘Western Balkans Media for Change’ (the Project) is being delivered in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The Project aims to support independent media outlets and individual journalists, as well as to engage with diverse women, young and underrepresented journalists and their networks, to help improve their operational capacity and capability, business sustainability, innovation potential, and to increase their audience reach and local, regional and thematic collaboration across the Western Balkans. The Project will strengthen resilience to threats to media freedom and better equip media to produce more quality, fact-checked and engaging gender sensitive content that will reach wider audiences, especially those susceptible to disinformation.

Independent media outlets in the WB are vulnerable to a wide range of threats, which have been exacerbated by the Covid pandemic, economic crisis and ongoing wars and military conflicts. Western Balkans countries face similar challenges, including a shrinking space for media freedom, small advertising markets, political influence distorting the media landscape, unfair competition from regional and global players, inconsistent application of legal frameworks, poor regulation, and shifts in audience behaviour and advertising practices. These factors collectively pose a significant threat to the existence, sustainability and survival of independent media. According to the 2023 Reporters Without Borders report, which assesses the overall journalistic environment, the Western Balkans countries rank as follows on the World Media Freedom Index: Albania (96th place), Serbia (91st place), Bosnia and Herzegovina (64th place), Kosovo (56th place), Montenegro (39th place), and North Macedonia (38th place).¹

Women, youth and marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable to threats and risks to media freedom and independence that keep them excluded. They remain under and misrepresented both in the media and as citizens and audience groups. Women in the media do not enjoy equal opportunities, representation in the media content, support, development or career progression, and have led in the debates challenging gender norms, power imbalances and the root causes of inequality and exclusion in the media and society. Media for All project (2020-2023) research showed that almost half of young

¹ <https://rsf.org/en>

people in the Western Balkans do not trust any media. They predominantly use online sources of information, with a focus on social media platforms and peer sharing.²

The project is funded by the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) of the UK Government and implemented by a consortium led by the British Council³, with the Balkans Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN)⁴, Thomson Foundation⁵ and INTRAC (The International NGO Training and Research Centre)⁶. The duration of the project is until March 2025.

2. Objectives and scope of the Call

The Project's overall objective is to engage more Western Balkans citizens with credible sources of information and editorially responsible narratives by making journalists and outlets more resilient to threats to media freedom and disinformation, and by improving the business sustainability of independent media. The project mainly focuses on supporting large and medium size independent media outlets and journalists from the Western Balkans.

The project seeks to increase the audience size in terms of volume, but also in terms of outreach to include harder-to-reach audiences - those that are the most vulnerable to disinformation including women, young people, diaspora, other marginalised communities, people aged 65yrs+.

The following are the long-term outcomes that the project aims to achieve through this grant scheme:

- Larger and more diverse audiences access quality, gender-sensitive and engaging content
- Outlets and independent journalists are more resilient and better equipped to provide quality and engaging journalism, with a focus on engagement of diverse women, youth, and underrepresented groups

² <https://www.britishcouncil.mk/en/programmes/society/media/youth/programme-youth-media-outlets>

³ www.britishcouncil.org

⁴ <https://birn.eu.com/>

⁵ <http://www.thomsonfoundation.org/about/>

⁶ <https://www.intrac.org>

Specific objectives of the project plans to achieve through this grant scheme are as following:

- Implement new/innovative strategies, ideas or models that support media outlets' resilience and sustainability
- Foster implementation of new systems, tools or products to attract, engage and diversify audiences
- Increase production of quality, gender-sensitive and engaging content

3. Available funding and allocations

The funding available under this call for applications should fall within the following two ranges:

Group 1:

Applicants with more than 50,000.00 GBP annual turnover and more than 10 staff members employed in the media outlet (permanent, on a fixed term, part-time basis, volunteers and associates) may request a grant that falls within the following range:

- Minimum amount: 50,000.00 GBP
- Maximum amount: 60,000.00 GBP

Group 2:

Applicants with more than 100,000.00 GBP annual turnover and more than 15 staff members employed in the media outlet (permanent, on a fixed term, part-time basis and associates) may request a grant that falls within the following range:

- Minimum amount: 60,000.00 GBP
- Maximum amount: 80,000.00 GBP

NOTE: No co-financing from the applicant's side is expected or is obligatory for this Call for Applications.

4. General rules for call for applications

4.1 Eligibility criteria

The applicant must fulfil the following criteria in order to be eligible for funding under this Project:

- Applicant must be a legal entity / media outlet established in North Macedonia, before 1 January 2020.
- Applicant must prove all due taxes paid in accordance with the local legislation.
- Proven commitment to professional and ethical standards of journalism (e.g. through membership in professional associations or self-regulatory bodies, through quantity and status of measure/s imposed by the regulatory or self-regulatory bodies, upholding the highest professional practices including existence of editorial policies, proof of adopted internal policies on ethical journalism standards or guidelines for countering disinformation and misinformation, published impressum, implemented international quality assessment processes, etc.)
- Applicant must demonstrate grant absorption capacity. This is assessed based on this grant (if selected) and other ongoing donations/grants compared to the human resources available for administering all donations/grants.

Important Notes:

- Applying in partnership with another media outlet / organisation for the grant application purpose is not allowed as the grant scheme is focused on building individual capacity of selected media outlets.
- Applicant may apply for both LOT 1 and LOT 2 under this Call for Applications, but only one application can be approved for a grant (either LOT 1 or LOT 2).
- Applicant cannot be a beneficiary of UK funds or another donation or grant scheme financing activities that are identical to the ones proposed for this grant scheme.

4.2. Eligible activities

The following non-exhaustive list of activities will be considered as eligible for this Call.

LOT 1 – Business Innovation Synergiser programme

This LOT is tailored for established media organisations and larger outlets **with a validated business idea or an already developed plan or strategy that have the capacity to absorb the support to implement the business idea/plan/strategy.**

The following non-exhaustive list of activities, will be considered as eligible under LOT 1:

- **Introduction of new or upscaling existing** services, types of fundraising, crowdfunding, monetization options;
- **Developing new or upscaling existing products and tools** to attract and diversify audience;
- Implementing **audience/community engagement strategies** that could be used to increase trust and reinforce the mission of media outlets, and could be used as a basis for a new stream of monetization;
- Introducing or improving **digital content distribution** and outreach approaches sensitive to the needs and interests of their targeted audience/community with a special focus on women, youth, minorities, people aged 65yrs+, diaspora.

Applicants under LOT 1 are encouraged to propose business innovation and strategies that are ethical and professional, that integrate the protection of the rights and interests of diverse members among their target groups; that seek to amplify voices of diverse women and youth leaders in media; that focus on engagement of diverse women and youth as audiences and community members; that encourage women-led networking and collaboration.

The applicant may propose other activities that correspond with the vision and long-term objectives of this project and that relate to above-listed activities.

The Project will provide guidance for the beneficiaries in order to improve their operational capacity and capability, business sustainability and innovation potential, thus contributing to their resilience to media freedom threats. To do so, the Project will provide **structural support in the implementation of new - or the upscaling of existing - business models** by:

- Strengthening beneficiaries' **capacities** through providing knowledge and skills (tailored training);

- Facilitating advancement of beneficiaries' **capabilities** to put newly acquired skills and knowledge to grow their own potential (mentoring); and
- Providing **resources** – through one-off financial support (grants) - in order to implement ideas, business models or strategies.

Technical assistance in form of ongoing mentorship and capacity-building support that is tailored to the individual needs of the media outlets will include the following optional additional support in form of masterclasses, mentorship regarding recognition of trustworthy journalism and professionalism, and specific technical support aligned to the supported business plan/strategy.

LOT 2 - Production of quality audience-engaged content

This LOT offers support towards **production of quality engaging content created with engagement and for diverse audiences, including women, young people and underrepresented groups.**

The types of activities eligible for support should be centred around, but are not limited to:

- **Production and publishing of quality content in various formats** based on information and data obtained from the Engaged Citizens Reporting (ECR) tool. Local and cross-border investigative cooperation is encouraged.
- **Innovative approaches and activities for engaging the audience** (debates, social media campaigns, local community events, cooperation with local CSOs and others) in production of quality, investigative, fact-checked, gender-sensitive, appealing, and innovative content.
- **Innovative tools and methods for promotion of the produced content** which attracts larger and more diverse audiences.

Applicants under LOT 2 will receive the following type of assistance and support:

- Strengthening beneficiaries' **capacities** through providing knowledge and skills (tailored training);
- Facilitating advancement of beneficiaries' **capabilities** to put newly acquired skills and knowledge to grow their own potential (mentoring); and

- Providing **resources** – through one-off financial support (**grants**) - in order to implement ideas, business models or strategies.

More specifically, this includes:

- **Access to the Engaged Citizens Reporting (ECR) tool.** This online platform serves both media and citizens and will be provided by the project and installed on the grantee's web. It helps media outlets ask their audiences about topics of interest while at the same time allowing citizens to report any issues or areas of concern in a safe and secure way.
- **Know-how and capacity building** for engaging audiences (including vulnerable communities: women, young people, 65+, diaspora, and marginalized groups) in the production of investigative, fact-checked, gender sensitive, appealing, and innovative content, and content sharing through **training, editorial and mentorship support and networking events.**

Applicants under LOT 2 are encouraged to demonstrate how the engagement of diverse audiences through the ECR tool might be strengthened by their existing and/or planned organisational and editorial efforts to mainstream gender and social inclusion concerns, and to produce content that is ethical and professional. This includes content that integrates the protection of the rights and interests of diverse members among target groups; that seeks to amplify the voices of diverse women and youth leaders in the community; that focuses on the engagement of diverse women and youth as audiences and community members; and that encourages women-led networking and collaboration.

The applicant may propose other activities that correspond with the vision and long-term objectives of this project and that relate to the above-listed activities.

4.3. Duration of the project

The duration of the project must not exceed **eleven (11) months** in total.

4.4. Location

The activities should be implemented in North Macedonia.

4.5. Eligible and ineligible costs

The following are the eligible costs foreseen by the applicant under this Call when completing the Budget Form (Annex 2)

Eligible costs:

Category	Explanation
Human Resources Costs	<p>Should only include cost of applicant's staff and experts directly involved in the implementation of the proposed project, proportionate to their level of involvement. Salaries and honoraria should be reasonable for the proposed project activities performed, and consistent with the salary history, professional skills and experience. Please provide clear description of roles and responsibilities in the Specification/Justification column of the Budget Form.</p>
Programmatic Costs	<p>Programmatic costs should be divided into Cost per Activity, and Operational Costs. In both cases only direct programmatic costs will be allowed, and an example of activity costs and operational costs is provided below:</p> <p><i>Activity Costs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Subsistence costs of project staff, experts and beneficiaries related to the implementation of activities; - Costs of meetings, training events essential to the project; - Basic catering costs associated with events or meetings directly related to activities; - Translation costs; - Publication costs directly related to the activities; - Short term room hire including hire of audio-visual equipment; - Developing digital platforms and locally owned digital audience tool; - Other activity related costs. <p><i>Operational Costs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social media and other advertising;

Category	Explanation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - IT support, website development; - Transport and/or fuel costs; - Communication costs (telephone and internet) - Office costs such as office rent, office supplies and other utilities might be included if relevant to project activities, these costs must be kept to a reasonable minimum.
Equipment	Purchase of equipment is allowed up to 50% of the total value of proposed budget for equipment essential to the successful implementation of the project. Use of equipment should be clearly justified. These may also include specialist software licences and online app or webinar licences essential to the project.

Ineligible costs:

Category	Explanation
General office equipment and costs	Costs of purchase of office furniture and other equipment such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desks, chairs, filing cabinets, photocopiers, fax machines. • Patent costs.
Construction costs	Costs relating to the construction and purchase of physical infrastructure, (e.g. office buildings, media rooms, media studios).
Entertainment	Entertainment costs such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gifts • Alcohol • Restaurant bills or hospitality costs for personnel not directly participating in the project
Excessive transport	Excessive taxi fares and/or fuel costs.

4.6. Instructions for Application Submission

4.6.1. Application form content

Applications must be submitted in line with the instructions and guidance of this Call. The following documents should be submitted when applying for this Call:

1. Application Form (Annex 1)
2. Budget Form (Annex 2)

The Application Form should contain the following annexes:

1. Registration documents (certificate) of the legal entity confirming that it is registered within the country of application,
2. Document(s) that prove(s) that the media outlet is established before 1 January 2020 (if different from date of Legal Registration),
3. Financial statements for the 2021 and 2022 calendar years,
4. Certificate from relevant tax authority that the legal entity has paid all due taxes, in accordance with local legislation and issued no earlier than December 2023.

The Application Form and Budget should be completed in **English language**.

The Application Form should be signed and stamped.

Hand-written Application Forms will not be accepted.

Any error or major discrepancy related to the Application Form instructions may lead to its rejection.

Clarifications will only be requested when the information provided is not sufficient to conduct an objective assessment.

The Project reserves the right to request the original versions of submitted documents from applicants.

4.6.2. Where and how to send the applications

The Application Form must be submitted exclusively via e-mail in both PDF (signed, stamped and scanned) and original editable format (Word). Signed, stamped and scanned versions must contain the same information as the editable formats. In the case of any discrepancies, the signed, stamped and scanned version will prevail.

The application must be submitted within the given deadline (see Section 4.6.3) to the following e-mail address: mediagrantsmkd@britishcouncil.org

The Application Form (with supporting documents) must be sent with the email subject consisting of the Lot No. (Lot 1 or Lot 2) Action Grant Scheme and Name of the applicant. (e.g. LOT1 Action Grant Scheme_Media XYZ)

Once the application is submitted, the Project will generate a unique application ID number. **Applicants should note this number and use it in all communications with the Project.**

4.6.3. Application deadline

The applicant must submit the Application Form by **14 February 2024** at 24:00 local time. Applications submitted after the deadline will not be considered for funding. The deadline applies to all parts of your application, including supporting documentation.

4.6.4. Clarifications, Questions & Answers

Requests for clarification should be submitted in English to the email address below: mediagrantsmkd@britishcouncil.org by **February 2nd 2024 at 17:00** at the latest.

The Online information session will be held on **January 30th 2024**. The session will be conducted in the local language. The exact time of the online information session will be provided in due course.

4.7. Evaluation and Selection

STEP 1: ADMINISTRATIVE AND ELIGIBILITY CHECK

During the administrative check the following will be assessed:

- Compliance with the submission deadline. If the deadline has not been met, the application will automatically be rejected.
- The Application Form satisfies all criteria specified in section 4.1 Eligibility criteria and subsection 4.6.1 Application Form content. If any of the requested information/document is missing or is incorrect, the application may be rejected on that sole basis and it will not be evaluated further.

Any application that passes this check will be evaluated further as part of the quality assessment.

STEP 2: EVALUATION CRITERIA (QUALITY ASSESSMENT)

The evaluation grid is divided into sections and subsections. Each section will be given a score between 1 and 15 (relevance of proposal and operational capacity criteria)⁷ and between 1 and 10 (sustainability and financial proposal criteria)⁸, depending on the level of criteria met.

The following are the evaluation (quality assessment) criteria for applications that passed the administrative check:

Criteria	Total Score (max) 50
<p>1. Relevance of proposal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the proposal correspond to the specific objectives of this Call? • Does the proposal identify clearly which parts of the business model/plan will be implemented through the support of this grant (LOT1) or does the applicant show interest, commitment, and a clear plan for audience engagement in quality content production (LOT2)? • Are the results, deliverables and activities clear and feasible? Are the Activity Plan and the timeline clear? • Does the proposal clearly identify target groups and audience (to be reached by proposed project)? • Does the proposal clearly outline specific engagement in the activities by diverse women, young and underrepresented groups and journalists? 	<p>Max 15 points</p>
<p>2. Organisational capacity</p>	<p>Max 15 points</p>

⁷ The scoring will be translated as follows: 13–15 points - an exceptional level; 10–12 points - very high level; 7–9 points - high level; 4–6 points - adequate level; 1–3 points - low level; and 0 points - fails to meet any of the criteria to an adequate level

⁸ The scoring will be translated as follows: 9–10 points - an exceptional level; 7–8 points - very high level; 5–6 points - high level; 3–4 points - adequate level; 1–2 points - low level; and 0 points - fails to meet any of the criteria to an adequate level

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicant demonstrates operational capacity to implement the project • Applicant has sufficient and relevant experience in implementation of projects of similar complexity • Applicant has proven audience engagement and relationship with local community (including diverse groups of women, men, LGBTI, young people, 65yrs+, diaspora, ethnic, national, religious minorities and other marginalised or vulnerable communities) • Applicant’s audience reach meets the criteria, and the plan for improved and / or diversified audience reach is clear and feasible • The risks and challenges identified are specific and manageable, and there is a mitigation plan proposed • Applicant demonstrates commitment to professional and ethical standards of journalism 	
<p>3. Sustainability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The proposal clearly identifies activities and results that contribute to the sustainability of the media outlet in one or more of the following ways: production of quality gender sensitive and engaging content; attracting and diversifying audiences; integration of new/innovative strategies and tools; engaging audiences beyond project lifetime; financial and operational model. 	<p>Max 10 points</p>
<p>4. Financial proposal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The proposed budget demonstrates value for money, and is feasible • Costs are realistic and reasonable. 	<p>Max 10 points</p>

Applications with higher scores will be recommended by the evaluation panel for possible grant award, subject to available funding.

STEP 3: DUE DILIGENCE

The Due Diligence process will be conducted in parallel with the evaluation process. Due Diligence will be conducted through the Due Diligence Checklist, which will be provided to the applicant by the project team.

The Due Diligence Checklist is a self-declaration document to be filled in by the applicant and which will be confirmed by the Project. Any missing supporting document or any incoherence between the declaration by the applicant and the supporting documents may lead to the rejection of the application on that sole basis.

Any rejected application will be replaced by the next best placed application on the reserve list that falls within the available budget for this Call for Applications.

STEP 4: NOTIFICATION

Applicants will be informed in writing, by e-mail, on decisions concerning their application.

The following is the **indicative table** of the application, evaluation and notification process:

Call for Application process	Date / Month
Launching of the Call	15 January 2024
Deadline for requesting any clarifications from the Project in writing	02 February 2024
Information session	30 January 2024
Final Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) sent to applicants	05 February 2024
Deadline for submission of applications	14 February 2024 (until 24:00)
Notification to rejected applicants on the results of the administrative check (Step 1)	26 February 2024
Notification to applicants on the results of the qualitative assessment and due diligence (Step 2 & Step 3)	27 March 2024
Grant Agreement Signature	28 - 29 March 2024

5. Conditions of implementation

5.1. Contractual arrangements

Selected applicants will be considered for funding under this Call for Applications. Subject to a successful due diligence check, a grant agreement containing terms and conditions will be signed with British Council.

5.2. Visibility

All project-related visibility activities will be carried out in accordance with the Project Communication Strategy. Grantees will be required to plan and carry out communication activities in accordance with Project rules and procedures. All equipment purchased from the grant donation will be properly marked to reflect the ownership.

Grantees will receive a Publicity toolkit designed by the Project to support their promotional activities and guide them on the Project's visibility requirements.

5.3. Data Protection Policy

The British Council takes data protection seriously and recognises the importance of collecting and managing data in a way that protects the rights of the people with whom we work. In doing this we work to a set of internationally recognized minimum standards in data management and we support our grant beneficiaries in working to the same minimum standards.

We apply the UK Data Protection Act (incorporating the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in all our global operations unless the local equivalent law is stronger. For more detailed information and guidance, please refer to our website: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/privacy-cookies/data-protection>.

Annexes

Annex 1: Application Form

Annex 2: Budget Form